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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the entire undergraduate foreign language (FL) curriculum needs to be rethought to integrate language, literature, and culture from the beginning through the advanced levels. It proposes a curriculum that is organized around sociocultural and sociohistorical values, attitudes, and issues and gives preference to literary texts in the broad sense. The paper discusses disjunction between lower-division and upper-division FL courses, goals of intermediate-level courses, roles of literature in FL curricula, and literature as a means of presenting culture at the intermediate level. It highlights an intermediate French sequence designed to integrate language, literature, and culture. The courses explored cultural values and attitudes, focusing on France and Quebec. They were intended to help students develop the cognitive abilities, linguistic skills, and cultural knowledge necessary for success in upper division courses by building on students' own preferences and goals. They were also intended to move the foreign language curricula away from literary history and civilization courses that strive to make students cultured without helping them understand the sociocultural significance of what they are studying. They provide a vehicle for re-relating culture studies and literary history. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

Relating Literature and Culture:

Putting Theory into Practice at the Intermediate Level

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Relating Literature and Culture: Putting Theory into Practice at the Intermediate Level

Introduction:

Disjunction between lower-division (language) and upper division (literature) FL courses

In the past few years a major concern among foreign language educators has been the disjunction between lower-division (that is, elementary and intermediate) and upper-division courses. This disjunction involves many factors. The lower-division courses usually focus on language skills and increasingly seek to develop oral proficiency, primarily through communicative activities that stress "survival" situations and casual interpersonal contact. Only rudimentary elements of popular or everyday culture are included. The upper-division courses, on the other hand, are primarily literary and focus on reading and writing. They depend on advanced linguistic and cognitive skills as well as in-depth cultural knowledge.

The student clientele is different as well. Lower-division courses, at least at the institution where I currently teach, are largely populated by students fulfilling the two-year foreign language requirement. When students recognize other reasons for studying a foreign language, they are usually pragmatic: travel, employment or interpersonal communication (see Martin and Laurie). Students in upper-division courses are usually majors and minors. At my institution, these students often have the same reasons for studying a foreign language. The decline in the number of majors in some languages suggests that students do not really believe in the pragmatic value of studying certain foreign languages or do not believe that the perceived literary focus of these majors will meet their pragmatic needs. R. B. Leal has pointed out a clear cleavage between the goals set by academics for their students, the goals students set for themselves and the goals that students

believed they had attained. "The main differences" Leal writes, "lay in the amount of emphasis placed on oral/aural and vocational preparation by the students versus their teachers' emphasis on writing and literature." Daniel Hawley also found that in assessing their overall program, students were most concerned about improvement in speaking ability.

The problem, of course, is how to eliminate the disjunction. Some institutions have developed "bridge" courses. This is not enough, in my opinion. The entire undergraduate foreign language curriculum needs to be rethought to integrate language, literature and culture from the beginning-level through the advanced seminar. The approach presented in this article differs from that of Richard Lambert in that the basis on the proposed curriculum is cultural and intellectual rather than pre-professional in the narrow sense. The proposed curriculum is organized around sociocultural and sociohistorical values, attitudes, concerns and issues and give preference to literary texts in the broad sense.

A. Goals of Intermediate-Level Courses

The curricular work presented in this article begins with the intermediate or second year course. Intermediate courses have long been considered problematic. What exactly were they supposed to accomplish? How did they differ from the elementary sequence? How did they prepare students for the variety of courses in the upper division?

Students enrolled in intermediate courses seem to want to continue what they had done in the elementary sequence or in high school. My own classroom observations correlate fairly well with the results of an extensive survey conducted by Linda Harlow and Judy Muyskens. They asked intermediate-level students to rank their learning goals for their current year of instruction. The top five goals related to speaking and listening in social, travel or job situations. The sixth goal

was survival in daily life activities. All the skills necessary to succeed in third year courses and beyond ranked lower on the list (7: reading non-literary texts; 9: grammar; 11: reading literary texts; 12: cultural awareness and knowledge). Career applications placed even lower.

Research done by Anne Martin and Ian Laurie suggests that these student attitudes result from students' inability to transfer gain between skills areas. They compartmentalize their learning. Since their primary goal is oral proficiency, they don't see that reading literature (even when followed by discussion and writing) contributes to the development of their communicative skills. Students approach reading with a "language mindset". They are looking for applications of literature that reflect the content of introductory language textbooks rather than the aims of literary theory or analysis: vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, examples of grammar in use, dialogues, even pronunciation practice by reading aloud.

Martin and Laurie hypothesize that a panic reaction may be as important as ineffective basic reading strategies, student skepticism about literature's contribution to skills development, or the language anxiety identified by Stephen Krashen. "Students," they write, "often feel they lack the cultural background to enable them to relate to foreign literature (and, for many any literature at all) except at the level of private and personal enjoyment." Martin and Laurie's research confirmed Elizabeth Bernhardt's "world knowledge variables" as a significant factor in students' ability and willingness to read in a foreign language. Janet Swaffar has also found that cultural knowledge may be more influential than lexical knowledge in understanding a text.

Martin and Laurie emphasize cultural anxiety, but I would add cognitive immaturity and insecurity. Intermediate-level students often have not had sufficient occasions to develop higher order skills and to move beyond the self-centeredness of elementary courses into the other-centeredness necessary to be interested in larger issues. They have also not been pushed to move

from the concrete everyday toward more general and abstract considerations. Lack of practice can lead to feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

Martin and Laurie suggest sequencing intermediate level course content to ensure that students' cultural literacy as well as their linguistic skills are developed before they move into literary studies. They suggest that this be done through the development of systematic grammars of the target culture including both popular and elite cultures. While this approach has much to recommend it, it continues the literature/culture dichotomy that I would argue is both false and itself ideologically (or culturally) motivated. Literature is not distinct from culture, either popular or elite, but rather itself a cultural manifestation.

B. The roles of literature in FL curriculum

Literature should play a "crucial role" at all levels of a foreign language curriculum. (Literature is understood here in the broad sense to include all language use with an esthetic dimension, including contemporary songs and popular tales.) By learning to read and interpret literary texts, "students can develop a full range of linguistic and cognitive skills." They can also acquire knowledge of culture in both its diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Moreover, they can heighten their aesthetic as well as their interpersonal sensitivities. (Henning, "Integration")

The literary text can play this role because it is intricately related to its various contexts.¹ A text, any text, is a historically situated use of language. It is therefore already the articulation of a complex network of differential relations. This means that it will comprise a variety of tendencies that are mutually implicated. Yet these tendencies are seldom entirely harmonious.

Moreover, a literary text is simultaneously engaged in some degree of interaction with a plurality of significant contexts. Some of them are the cultural tradition, sociocultural conventions,

contemporary sociopolitical reality, and literary history (including the history of modes of discourse or genres), the author's life, the corpus of the author's work.

The literary text can respond to its sociocultural contexts in various ways and on various levels. These levels are never fully distinct. Nevertheless, at least two can be distinguished. They almost inevitably coexist, though not always in perfect accord. The first level is that of plot, characterization and theme. Here sociocultural values, attitudes and assumptions will be presented and developed largely through description, commentary, argument or speculation. The second level is that of style or form, structure and overall use of language. Here an equally substantial and coherent view of the sociocultural context can find expression. There is of course the sociocultural dimension of ordinary language use, e.g., modes of address, expressions of time and place, choice of vocabulary. Beyond this there is the more implicit analogy that exists between the literary conventions employed within a text and traditional values and assumptions.

The relation between these levels is complex. Nonetheless, it does seem possible to distinguish a number of more specific ways in which a literary text may actually be said to respond to its relevant sociocultural context. In these ways it contributes to an understanding of this context. These can be provisionally grouped into two loose categories.

The literary work may be said to represent established values, attitudes, concepts and relations. It dramatizes, illustrates and thematizes them. In this way they are conserved and preserved. This perception of the text, however, raises all the problems of mimesis and representation. It would be better here to adopt Dominick LaCapra's term "symptomatic." He uses it to refer to "a process of reinforcement and 'legitimation' of the given--a process that cannot be reduced to mere mirroring because it is also productive and reproductive of the given" (*Madame Bovary*, 19).

The text should not be seen as a simple instance of the long tradition. Nor does it merely illustrate a specific historical moment. It is rather a question of how the text, the tradition and the specific moment repeat one another with variations over time. It is a question of how common ideas function differently in diverse texts and corpuses. The long tradition and the specific time intersect in the text and the text effects variations in both. Rather than being autonomous, the text is always situated in a rational network.

Many works of literature do have important reflective dimensions. Yet even in these works something more may be going on than simple representation. The literary text may also have inventive or productive capacities. Such capacities allow it to relate to its sociocultural context in creative fashion as well. The text, then, does not simply illustrate conventional values or attitudes; it also reworks them.

Intentionally or not, a creative response to the sociocultural context will involve at least two complex movements or stages. The first stage is an active, often critical, examination of prominent features or tendencies. These include hierarchies of value and authority, structures of power, the pursuit of some ideal. The literary work may respond by questioning established patterns of behavior and thought. It may test or even challenge prevailing sociocultural values, assumptions and institutions. It may do this on either the narrative or the formal and stylistic levels, or on both at once. In addition to its contestatory aspects, literature may propose alternatives to the existing state of affairs. LaCapra refers to these dimensions as the critical and the transformative respectively (*Madame Bovary*, 19-20).

This theoretical framework has a direct relationship to an actual French or Spanish or German curriculum integrating language, literature and culture throughout the levels of study from beginning to senior seminars. The broad lines of such a curriculum have been sketched out

elsewhere (Henning, "Integration," 24-26). Before bringing together the theoretical framework and the curricular sketch, I would like to recall a graduated arrangement that has been used to develop guidelines for assessing literary interpretation skills (Henning, "Assessing," 341).

The functions employed progress "from recognizing (mention in passing) and distinguishing (mention with commentary) through describing (discuss in some detail) to understanding (sustain analysis) and finally to analyzing critically" (Henning, "Assessing"). Of course for students to be able to accomplish these functions at one level of their program they must have been trained to perform them at a prior level and given many occasions to practice.

Putting together the levels of literary discourse, the responses of the literary discourse to its sociocultural context and the functions mentioned above, I would like to suggest that students first be introduced to the symptomatic aspect of the narrative dimension of literary texts before going on to discover the critical, although in some cases the two aspects may be introduced almost simultaneously. Later they can come to understand the narrative's transformative dimension. At this time they can be shown the symptomatic and critical dimensions of language use. Finally they can become aware of the transformative aspect of language. Because the transformative is related to irony and other double-voiced modes, it requires the development of higher order cognitive and linguistic skills.

The present investigation will focus on the intermediate level of foreign language study. At this level students can learn to recognize the sociocultural dimension of literary texts while at the same time being introduced to some of their formal aesthetic aspects. The emphasis, I believe, should be on the symptomatic aspect of literature in a synchronic mode. Students would thus be prepared both to distinguish the symptomatic on their own in subsequent courses and to recognize the critical and even transformative dimension. They would also be comfortable in a synchronic

mode before confronting development over time in more advanced courses that focus on literary or sociocultural history. This does not mean that the choices of texts need to be restricted at the beginning or intermediate levels to contemporary texts. On the contrary, materials can be selected from all historical periods. But class activities do not have to focus on the historical aspects of the texts.

C. Literature as a means of presenting culture at the Intermediate Level

I would now like to describe an intermediate French sequence that I designed, and actually taught, based on this understanding of student attitudes and programmatic objectives. The foundation work for this undertaking was done as part of a Cross-Border Studies project (1993-1995) funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Existing intermediate level French courses were revised to introduce students, in the target language, to the major francophone culture of North America through a systematic comparison with its European counterpart. The courses explore cultural values and attitudes.

The following topics were chosen, after surveying friends and colleagues in France, Quebec, and the U.S., to reflect the priorities of French and Quebecois cultures:

- education
- gender relations
- family
- *le rythme de la vie* (work, leisure, routine, time)
- *la vie corporelle* (body, health, senses)
- social classes
- town and country

- nature
- the individual and the collectivity
- *la patrie* (homeland)
- the cultural heritage
- French language
- minorities

Several years ago when I began teaching this material, my class and I considered five topics each semester. This proved to be too many. Now we cover only four. In the first semester of the sequence we dealt with education, gender relations (*les rapports entre les sexes*), family, and *le rythme de la vie*. These topics, while having sociocultural significance, have nonetheless an immediate personal dimension as well. This made them more readily accessible to students coming from the beginning sequence. For the second semester I chose topics which related less directly to personal needs and more to larger, and somewhat more abstract, issues. They were town and country, nature, the cultural heritage, and *la patrie* (homeland). Each topic is approached by reading and discussing two literary texts: one from France and one from Quebec. This comparative approach does more than underscore similarities. Attention is given to difference as well.

Why compare France and Quebec? Most French textbooks in the US focus on France, not only because of its cultural and linguistic prominence, but also because students, and their teachers, seem to be more interested in France. Although increasingly textbooks are including more material about *la francophonie*, this inclusion does not provide an adequate picture of any one francophone area. Perhaps the point is simply to make students aware of the existence of French-speaking cultures around the world. Yet this almost token inclusion risks perpetuating stereotypes. We have chosen to focus on the one non-European francophone culture that is closest to us (geographically

economically, historically and culturally) and to have our students investigate it more systematically.

While we chose to focus on Quebec for sociopolitical as well as cultural reasons, our approach could be used for any French-speaking region, for example, the Caribbean, Saharan Africa, or Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, if materials were prepared for the other regions, instructors could choose the two areas on which to focus. It is most important to deal seriously with many aspects of a culture (or cluster of cultures), something that cannot be done in a single unit on *la francophonie*.

The course topics reflect what is most important to the cultures being studied. Many textbooks focus on topics supposedly of interest to American college students or that reflected the current ideological commitments of American academia. In both cases the foreign culture risks being seen through an American prism. As a result it may appear more familiar than it really is. When students come into actual contact with it, through a visit to the foreign country or a meeting with a culture bearer, they may be poorly equipped to process what is unfamiliar and may consequently respond negatively. More importantly, the existence of this American prism reinforces the idea that American students in particular and perhaps Americans in general are at best only interested in themselves and at worse ethnocentric.

Literary texts were chosen that introduce students to the culture's attitude toward a particular aspect of life. Literary texts were chosen not only because of their enduring quality, but more importantly because in France and Quebec, as in the rest of the francophone world, literature is an inextricable part of cultural identity. Literature is bound up with social, political, historical and even economic development. Thus, through literary texts, students can acquire knowledge of French and Quebecois culture in both their diachronic and synchronic dimensions. At the same

time, by reading and interpreting these texts, students can acquire higher order linguistic and cognitive skills as they develop their aesthetic and interpersonal sensitivities.

For each text I prepared:

- pre-reading activities that introduce students to the topic by linking it to their own experiences and to comparable aspects of American culture
- grammar review exercises based on the text
- vocabulary exercises based on the text.

Whenever possible I tried to expand upon vocabulary from the text. For example, a text particularly rich in Quebecois expression led to exercises comparing Quebecois and continental French words. A text describing nature led to activities based on animals and plants. Other exercises asked students to find cognates or elaborate families of words. In this way students could learn how to build upon their English skills to increase their reading comprehension. (They might even improve their reading comprehension of their native language by building their English vocabulary as well.)

- an introduction to the author
- vocabulary glosses
- reading comprehension exercises
- cultural exercises
- communicative activities based on the cultural topic and its textual treatment including role-playing, debates, accounts of related personal experiences.

When I first began working on this intermediate course, I duplicated all the materials and passed them out to students. At my current institution, I placed all the materials on a course WebPage on a university server. Students could access this WebPage from either their home

computers or from computers throughout the campus. They were asked to print out copies of the units for their own use.

This use of the Internet has allowed me to add some interesting features designed to enhance the learning experience. Links to other relevant websites were provided. Some were to online dictionaries. Others were to sites providing more information about the cultural topics or the authors. Unfamiliar vocabulary in the text and the exercises were hotlinked to the unit glossary. Other hotlinks were to websites that provided information about unfamiliar cultural references, including places (such as monuments in Paris or regions of Quebec), people (such as Bach and Mozart), and works of music or art. Students can submit some exercises electronically. They can also send me their compositions via e-mail if they choose. Now that I can schedule my classes in a "smart classroom," I have direct access to the Internet during class time and can better integrate WWW material into class activities. I also have the ability to play music and show videos.

When I was teaching closer to the Canadian border, I supplemented my regular classroom activities with several other components. In an additional weekly session, students engaged in a variety of communicative activities with a cultural focus. Often they watched video clips that reinforced the literary readings. These video clips were from feature films, commercials, animations, newsreels or promotional tapes. I selected about a ten-minute segment and then prepared pre-viewing, comprehension and communicative activities. At my current institution, we have been able to incorporate several of these video clips into our units.

At other times, Quebecois students from the local parochial high school were invited to discuss the cultural topics. This worked very well when we were focusing on attitudes toward education and when the discussion dealt with town and country life--topics whose cultural dimension could be related to personal experience.

We also had guest speakers from other campus departments. These faculty members discussed, usually in French, aspects of their own work that were related to the topics of the regular intermediate classes. A few of these faculty members had superior level skills. Many spoke French only slightly better than the students. (Those who were only novice speakers usually elected to make presentations in English.) A biologist spoke on the Charlevoix (Quebec) ecosystem, a ceramist and a print-maker presented the state of their arts in Quebec, a political scientist discussed the politics of language. The most successful speakers were able to relate their subjects to personal experience, such as the Director of Canadian Studies who described (in French) his experiences as an anglophone child growing up in a francophone community.

A final component with which I experimented was the cultural portfolio. I added it upon the recommendation of a colleague in Spanish who developed the concept and has used it successfully. The portfolio comprised two main components: a journal and a research project. In their journals, students had to write at least once a week their comments about the unit's text, video, or presentation. These comments had to answer the question: What have I learned about French or Quebecois culture? Students were also asked to choose a topic or theme of current events related to one of the course topics and then to gather information about it from a variety of sources, including the media and the Internet. These formed the basis of a class presentation and a 5-6-page report. The portfolio approach helped students become engaged in a cultural unit and active participants in the development of course materials.

Because of the larger size of my intermediate classes at my current institution and the level of preparation of the students, I decided to retain only the cultural journal. Students are required to send me electronically their journal entries. These entries formed the basis for their final in-class

compositions. I have offered the research project to students as a means of receiving Honors credit for the course.

Conclusion

The primary goal of the curricular projects described above is to help students develop the cognitive abilities, linguistic skills and cultural knowledge necessary for success in upper division (literature) courses by building on their own preferences and goals, rather than being limited by them. For me, however, the projects have other, less explicit goals. One is to move the foreign language curricula away from both literary history and "civilization" courses that strive to make students "cultured" rather than giving them understanding of the sociocultural (including aesthetic) significance of what they are studying. Another is to provide a vehicle for re-relating culture studies and literary history (or criticism). The internal diversity of the literary text and the complexity of its interactions with its multiple significant contexts contribute to its pluridimensionality. There is room, therefore, within its articulated structure for many perspectives and interpretations. Consequently, it provides a perfect matrix in which the different, and unfortunately sometimes antagonistic, components of the foreign language curriculum might be brought back into dialogue. Thus, the goal, in my opinion, should be to establish greater continuity throughout the entire foreign language curriculum, while recognizing that certain discontinuities are necessary to preserve both diversity and academic freedom.

NOTES

¹. This theoretical presentation draws heavily upon both the published and unpublished work of Dominick LaCapra, particularly his *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* and the lectures at Cornell University that preceded its publication.

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